

January 8, 2012

*“The Wilderness”*

Northside United Methodist Church

Mark 1:1-2; II Corinthians 4:5-9, 16; 5:17

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“Prepare ye the way of the Lord.” Prepare ye the way of the Lord. We hear John the Baptist shout those words, telling people to prepare for the coming of Jesus Christ. And I wonder what those words really mean to you. So let’s look at John the Baptist and what he did. He’s a unique character. His clothing is right off the back of a camel. His diet consist of insects and honey. Matthew’s Gospel says he calls the existing religious leaders “a brood of vipers” – not exactly a great way to win friends and influence people. He preaches, not from a pulpit in the synagogue or from a podium in the town square, instead he’s out in the wilderness. A place of rough going, unmarked paths, trials, difficulties, danger and fear. And he’s preaching, not some prosperity gospel, or words of comfort and assurance. No, he’s preaching repentance of our sins, and the need for forgiveness. And people are flocking to hear him! And to be baptized by him. Maybe they heard his wake-up call. Maybe they knew they were in need of forgiveness. And maybe some of us here do, too. And that’s good. But maybe some of us don’t. And that’s a problem. And so those in need of repentance come to John so that they might “prepare their way for the Lord.” And then one day, the Lord, Jesus himself appears. And John baptizes him. And Jesus sees the heavens open and the Holy Spirit descending like a dove and God says to him, “You are my son, my beloved. In you I am well pleased.”

Now we might ask, why did Jesus need to be baptized in the first place? He was without sin. He didn’t need to repent of anything. Well, Jesus was baptized in order to show us, and to share with us, what baptism means. Again in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus tells John he’s being baptized because, “It is proper in order to fulfill all righteousness.” You see, Jesus took what is for us a ritual of cleansing and forgiveness, and expanded it into something even greater. For when Jesus went down into the waters of the Jordan, and then came up out of those waters, it became symbolic of our death and resurrection. Death to sin, old habits, regrets, the past. And then coming out of the water became our resurrection, our rebirth, our new life in Christ. We are more than forgiven. We are made new. As St. Paul said today, “Anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new creation. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!” A new life in Jesus Christ in which we learn and grow and become more and more like Christ with his love and peace and joy as the very core of our being. That’s why, when we choose to be baptized, or have our children baptized, God speaks to each and every one of us as He did to Jesus, and

says, “You are my son, my daughter, my beloved. In you I am well pleased.” In baptism, God claims us as his own and proclaims his great and unconditional love for us.

And that’s wonderful and comforting news isn’t it? But that’s not all. Remember, after Jesus was baptized, St. Mark tells us, “The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.” Deep into the wilderness where Jesus is tempted by the devil and his faith is tested. But after just having had that experience of baptism, Jesus was able to come through that wilderness time standing up to every temptation the devil threw at him, knowing he had the love and blessings of God and the company of the Holy Spirit. And he came out of the wilderness ready to be the light in the darkness, that light that shines in our hearts. Ready to teach and heal. Ready to face his trials and difficulties. Ready even to go to the cross and die for our salvation. And I think he got through all the wilderness times of his life because remembered who he was and Whose he was. He remembered his baptism.

And it can be the same for you and me. We all have had and will have wilderness times in our lives. Times of trials, difficulties, confusion, fear and pain. And it is especially at those times we need to remember our baptism. Remember that we have God’s love and blessing and the company of the Holy Spirit. When Martin Luther, the great protestant reformer found himself ready to give up, struggling and worrying about his future and the future of the church, he would stop, touch his hand to his forehead and say, “Martin, remember that you are baptized.” Martin, remember that you are baptized. And that would be enough to give him strength and hope once again. Yesterday we had a funeral for one of Christ’s best disciples, Joe Eldridge. As many of you know, his imprint is all over Northside and this community. And Joe spent the last five years of his life in the wilderness fighting cancer. Yet despite all of his suffering and difficulties, just like Jesus in the wilderness, Joe never lost his faith. He knew who he was and Whose he was – a beloved child of God. And I’m certain, because of that, today he stands in front of God Almighty as a new creation. We heard St. Paul say today, “We are pressed on every side by troubles, but not crushed. We are perplexed but not driven to despair, persecuted but not abandoned by God, knocked down but not destroyed. That is why we never give up.” And as baptized children of God, we should never give up. For we can come out of the wilderness stronger, more mature in our faith, more like Christ in our words and actions. So that we can, like Christ, be a light to a world where so many are wandering in the wilderness. Jesus said that you and I are the light of the world. We are the salt of the earth and add flavor to the lives of others. We are a city on the hill, a beacon of joy and hope and contentment in a world gone mad. Don’t you want that?

Some of you may know that John and I went to New York last month and saw the new Broadway revival of Godspell. The show is performed at the Circle in the Square Theatre, which is a theater in the round. So there is no curtain, and the cast members enter and leave the stage through the various aisles, right next to the audience. It was exactly 8pm and we were expecting the show to start any minute, when I noticed a woman in a business suit walking down the aisle toward, I surmised, her seat. She was talking rather loudly on her cell phone and I thought to myself, how rude. But then she stepped right onto the stage. And the same thing was occurring in all the other aisles. Two guys walking down the aisle, joking and laughing, and then they stepped onto the stage. This continued until all fourteen cast members were on stage. All of them going this way and that way, causing much commotion and confusion. The businesswoman negotiating a deal on her phone, some were sitting together in a small circle acting out like they were at a gambling table, some were drinking, some were angry and fighting, everyone moving noisily about, everyone trying to shout down one another, to best one another, as they went about their lives. You get the idea. It's a commentary on our own lives... the busyness, the frenzy, the hurt, the uncertainty, the wilderness. And the cast is made up of people of all shapes, sizes and colors, just like us. Their outfits are quirky and somewhat strange, reminding us that we all have our personal quirks and often strange ways. And yet the theme of the play is, as St. Mark said today, "This is the Good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Let's watch a short clip from the play.

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iv\\_8EVI6d0&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iv_8EVI6d0&feature=related) (0-44 sec)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z1RuEc6JNDs&feature=related> (38-3:35 sec)

What an uplifting play! What an uplifting thought to be the light of the world. What a celebration of the power of Jesus Christ in our lives when we strive to see him more clearly, love him more dearly and follow him more nearly. Today is Baptism of the Lord Sunday. When we rejoice in the fact that God came to us in human form, and shares with us our humanity. Yes, Jesus Christ was baptized. He was baptized with us, baptized for us. He comes to where we are but he points us to a new way, a new life. And sometimes in this life, with all our busyness, with all the talking heads and the craziness of the culture, with everyone trying to shout down one another, trying to best one another, with all the illness, anger, fighting and associated hurt and uncertainty, we really need to stop and remember our baptism. We really need to stop and hear those words of John the Baptist, that voice in the wilderness, crying out, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord." Because his way...is the better way. Amen